

Shrouding Demons

by CarishTale

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Summary: AU. Hiccup never expected to have a friend - a white haired, blue eyed, floating person with cold resistant skin - because demons aren't supposed to have friends, aren't they? HiJack. Inspired by the song 'Demons' by Imagine Dragons.

1. Berk and Burgess

****Disclaimer: I own nothing. Sad. ****

****This story is dedicated to my 'big sister' amoechan. I hope you like it! And I'm so sorry if it is short. ****

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><p>When the days are cold

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><p>One of the strongest winter storms ever to hit land had slammed the Isle of Berk head on. It was marked by intense sub-zero winds forcing the citizens of Berk to seek protection from their heavily built houses. White-washed slopes of deep snow here and there, icicles hanging along the eaves of the houses, massive ice chunks floated down the docks. It would have looked beautiful if it weren't for the eerie shadows looming on the walls of the houses.<p>

The night fell and the darkness swept across the village obscuring any light coming from indoors. All in all, it looked like a ghost town with no one in sight but reflecting images of the shadows dancing in the moonlight.

It was a quiet evening. With nothing more than soft hoots from an owl and hefty howls of winds, Berk gave off an impression of an abandoned island. However, the sullen atmosphere was broken with an

ear-splitting roar that awoken the birds perched on the trees. They begun to fly away, their wings fluttering madly, they were clearly afraid.

Such disturbance caused many of the inhabitants to perk their ears up at the terrifying sound. But to some extent, Hiccup and the people of Berk were quite accustomed to the roar.

With a sigh, Stoick groaned, "Another unfortunate drake."

Inside the Haddock household, a massive teal dragon was sprawled on the floor near the fire pit. Its stubby limbs and long skinny tail were hidden under its large body. The bluish-green scales on its back gleamed as the moonlight coming from the window illumined it. Beautiful, that was until the reptile yawned displaying a wide mouth that came with a series of sharp teeth.

Cracking an eye open, Stoick stared at the figure across it as if he was expecting a reply. "Well, what do you say Hiccup?"

The figure, well hidden underneath the large masses of shadows in the room, snorted. One would not deny the fact that the figure was just as dark as the night for it blended with the shadows quite impressively. Its effulgent yellow eyes were peering at the bigger dragon with vexation as if it was the dark dragon's object of burden, "What do you expect me to say then?"

Observing the dragon on his opposite side with calculating eyes, Stoick grumbled, "Just get out of trouble son."

Sighing, Hiccup shut his eyes before muttering solemnly, "I'll try dad."

Just like every other night in the Haddock household, Hiccup stayed up late to watch his father fall into a deep sleep. He gazed at this father's form for a moment, inwardly commenting on how loud Stoick snored every now and then. This was his daily routine, to sleep at a rather later hour pondering about certain ideas and ploys before going to bed.

Ever since Hiccup was a youngling, his father, Stoick the Vast, had drilled him the basic concepts of their ancestral history. Back from the present time, their familial bond had a rather anticlimactic happenings bestowed upon them. Hiccup did not know the reason behind such events for his father left him with minimum details. All he knew was that they were a breed of mighty dragons who have received a blessing from the goddess to alter their appearance to human at the crack of dawn.

That was the tale that had been used for several years to sate the youngling's imaginative mind. The curiosity that had been developing generations over generations was hard to explain, or rather, hard to believe. Thus, the tale was the only way to serve as an explanation on how they could magically transform into a human at the first sign of daylight. The tale proved to be enough for the many.

However, unlike most people, Hiccup was never the one to be satisfied at some shallow tale for a clarification regarding their _magical_ situation.

There were many unanswered questions floating within the depths of his young mind, waiting to be solved. But no matter how much Hiccup wanted to grasp the answers, his father would just not allow him. He had asked his father several times concerning their dragon side but Stoick remained head strong. He would not say a thing apart from it was a blessing and that they should feel honoured.

'_Some blessingâ€|'_ Hiccup thought bitterly.

Stoick had even gone to some extreme measures when Hiccup persisted to tell him more. That day marked the start of a law where the people of Berk were not permitted to mention details about the story. The action brought Hiccup into misery as he was avoided by the lot, afraid of aggravating the chief any further.

Months passed before anger came as he felt the isolation of his home island multiply.

'_Stupid lawâ€|'_ Hiccup deemed the act as foolish when he arrived home one day with nothing but a book in hand. It was a thin book, not a book, more like a journal. Intricate designs adorned the cover and no author was stated however, at the center was the title of the journal written in refined calligraphy.

He arrived home alone at the Haddock compound, his father was somewhere attending his chiefly duties but Hiccup could not care less. As long as his father was away, he had all the peace in the world no matter how lonely he got.

This had continued for weeks. Hiccup would proceed to the library to borrow books and leave to resume his studies. It lasted for almost a year until one moonless night; Stoick was alerted of what his son was doing.

"_I told you that it's dangerous for you to know!" _

He was furious. Stoick have told Hiccup countless of times to stop his research but the boy kept on defying his words. It would get Hiccup nowhere, _just like Valhallarama. _

And so to avoid it, Stoick was left with no choice but to destroy his son's solace. He left nothing in pieces. It was completely annihilated. Burned until every single piece of literature was in ashes, even the structure was not spared. All were in ruins and the library was no more.

Hiccup was devastated whereas Stoick was delighted. The people of Berk couldn't care more concerning their chief's wreckage for it had nothing to do with them. The library was just another portion of land thought to be useless since it was filled with nothing but legends.

Those valuable knowledge and wisdom it possessed were forever gone, unreachable by Hiccup's hands.

'_Stupid curseâ€|'_

This was not a blessing Hiccup concluded. Blessings rained down happiness to the ones given not the other way around. From what Hiccup had observed Berk was never the high-spirit island of flourish

from the books. Contradicting to the popular belief, Berk was the abode of dread and looming shadows, a dark and depressing world.

It was a dreary place to live in.

Lost were the drakes in Berk. They had been living with no passion. Hope was gone and all were giving up because of this suffering.

'_Suffering from whatâ€|?'_

With no inspiration and things to do around, he felt hollow like a pouch devoid of any coins. None could please him as his father had already destroyed the library. None would try to converse with him, afraid to ire his father.

As he stared at his father's massive dragon form, Hiccup could not help but to devise a plan. A set of detailed actions that would leave him clear from those drakes' prying eyes, free from Stoick's bounds and safe from Berk's dismal land. A warm feeling arose within his chest as he pondered about the bleak confinement he would soon be released.

Hiccup may know a little about their situation but he knew one, true fact. It would be dangerous for them to wander around. From the rumours Hiccup heard, all those who stray away from the Hooligan Village would either go back insane or left missing with no indication as to where they were headed. True or not, it was still unsafe to be out there.

To the naked eye, outside their village was just the woodland. But in reality, it was a forest equipped with countless things unknown to man. There could be rapacious beasts living, venomous insects or cannibals ready to pound Hiccup at the instant.

Amid such consequences, one thing remained the same: Hiccup's desire for knowledge. He would bravely cross the woods in search for the answers he wanted, that was how desperate Hiccup was to understand his homeland's burden. As the old saying goes, _'Experience is the best teacher.'_

His plan was fairly simple. It consisted of him gathering his things at the first sign of dawn, making sure his father was already out with his chiefly duties before heading away to the Cove. There weren't many people there for most were afraid of the dangers ahead, but Hiccup was not having any of that. Maybe this was all what Hiccup needed all along. Dangerous as it may be, an adventure would be his only key of unlocking their curse's secrets.

Knowing that his father has heightened hearing, Hiccup silently rose as to avoid disturbing his father's sleep. It would be an exciting tomorrow ahead of him and he would surely need all the energy he could get.

Upon reaching his quarters, he nudged open his door in a sluggish manner. Inside, one could see that the room was filled with sketches and drawings enclosed on all sides of the wall. Yellow eyes scanned the room in all various directions, happily reminiscing about the inspiration he got when Hiccup was first introduced to the art of drawing. His eyes fell on the ground where a certain piece of paper

was left astray.

Hiccup couldn't help but to smile when he saw what it was. It was a picture of a boy about his age carrying a little girl, who looked a lot like the boy, was walking under the moonlight, both unbothered by the cold blizzard and petrifying shadows. They seemed happy amidst the unpleasant surroundings. It was a nice thing having to think about the tranquillity he would soon grasp where there it won't be battled with dread. No Stoick to tell him no. No villagers to look down on him. He would be free.

-o-o-o-o-

Burgess, 1700

Burgess was a place of activity. Small as it may be, its streets were always brimming with people of different ages. Children all over the place were happily playing around, entertaining themselves with child-like innocence. Adults occupy their time by doing work, grazing cattle or bartering.

It was when snow started to fall softly that the populace stopped to gaze at the heavens. Thin tendrils of cloud formed high in the sky overshadowing the blue atmosphere. Soft piece of frozen water designed in intricate pattern descended freely causing the little ones to stare in awe. Some raised their arms to catch one but as soon as their hand touched with the snowflake, it dissolved, liquefied due to their heat.

Snowflakes signified the start of the winter season. Due to this, most could not help but to rush. It was getting cold and Burgess would soon face the bitter chill. Most adults begun to usher their young inside their houses for warmth but the others remained outside.

Although it was already the beginning of winter, everyone was still occupied. The road was bustling with activity as merchants exchanged food and apparels to the people in need of supplies for the winter season.

At the back of a stall, a trader with short ash blonde hair wearing thick clothing mounted his dapple grey mustang with a carriage filled with sacks of firewood. Nudging his horse with the use of his heel to move both paced the streets passing merchants and buyers on their way. He was supposed to look for an inn to stay for the winter, but sadly, all were full. He had no choice but to leave Burgess at the coming of winter.

"Hey wait! Hold up!" A voice called, halting his departure.

Glancing at his back, the trader saw a boy in his late adolescence running while clutching a shepherd's crook. The boy had brown hair with matching eyes, a poncho billowing backwards as he tried to catch up with him.

When the boy reached the trader, he was breathless as if the boy had partaken in one of those marathons, "How much is for a sack?"

The trader replied in a gruff manner with his Australian accent rolling, "Two pounds."

"What?! Two pounds is too much, make it one."

With a sigh, the trader negotiated, "One pound and ten shillings, take it or leave it."

The boy heaved a long, loud breath before responding, "Come on, you have sacks and sacks of wood enough for the whole winter."

The trader huffed, aware of how many firewood he have. "That's business, mate."

The boy closed his eyes, with his eyebrows furrowing, as if he was in deep concentration. His family has firewood, fine, however it was not adequate to last for the whole winter season. _'Not even sufficient to last up 'till mid-winter.' _Jack inferred, and he sure as hell would not let his family suffer from the cold no matter how much he enjoyed it.

"Make it twoâ€|" Blinking open his eyes, he pleaded unto the trader's light green orbs, "â€|please?"

A minute without responding, the trader concluded, "Fine, how many do you need?"

"Yes!" The boy laughed, eyes gleaming with mirth as he watched the trader got down from his horse, "I'll need two sacks!"

Halting on his tracks, he eyed the boy in front of him. He looked thin, frail even, "Uh huh, and can you carry a sack twice your weight?"

Looking quite offended, the boy replied, "'Course I can! You haven't seen," He lifted an arm and flexed to show his lean biceps, "all the wonders these muscles can do."

The trader pursed his chapped lips contemplating about something. "What's your name boy?"

"Jackson. Jackson Overland." The boy said, playing with his staff.

* * *

><p>E. Aster Bunnymund.<p>

That was the name Jack had been given when he asked for the trader's name in return. Quite amusing really, given his surname started with the word 'bunny' for bunnies were anything but this serious, lofty man walking beside him. And bunnies were certainly not a six-foot tall man towering over Jack's flimsy stature, so Jack bluntly nicknamed him E. Aster Kangaroo, or simply 'The Easter Kangaroo'.

After scoffing at the given nickname, Aster had proposed a deal. He had informed Jack how he was in need of a place to stay for the winter, noting the desperation in the boy's voice as he pleaded for Aster's firewood.

Both have come into an agreement moments later when the snow begun filling up the streets. Most people had already been away in their

homes and few could be seen outside.

The winds were starting to get colder by the minute as the two men proceed to walk towards Jack's dwelling, with Aster's horse and carriage beside.

"So wait, lemme get this straight. _You _can make a boomerang." Jack said as Aster noted that it was a statement rather than a question.

"You seem surpriseâ€|" Aster said, his voice trailing at the end. Looking at the brunette beside him, Jack was clearly amazed like a he had just done some magic gimmick.

"Of course! I mean, that's so cool!" Jack said, giddy at the sudden thought of how 'cool' it was to use a boomerang, "Could you teach me how to use a boomerang?"

"No. You'd probably use it for _different _reasons." When Aster learned how mischievous could Jack be, after he had been given that bloody nickname, he accepted the fact that he would be Jack's soon-to-be target of pranks. How wonderful. Well, at least he got a place to stay.

Jack chuckled in reply, his laughter reverberating through the lot of shacks. By now, they were near the forest and lake making the ground a little bit rough unlike in the town square. Pieces of rocks were positioned their way making the carriage jerk slightly.

"I'll teach you how to ice skate, how about that?"

Without even hesitating, Aster blandly replied, "No."

"Oh, come on!" Jack whined, throwing his hands in the air for emphasis.

"I'd rather make a quid." Aster could not help but to roll his eyes in exasperation. This brunette dipstick was getting on his nerves. It was as if ice skating could help him earn a living.

Lost in his own thoughts, Aster was blindly walking forward that he didn't noticed that his companion wasn't beside him anymore. It was later when he came into attention that Jack left him. That was until a something cold hit the back of his head.

Snowballâ€|

Jack snickered. It was soon replaced by an annoying cackle that resounded throughout the entire area. He seemed amused by his act that tears streaked his pale face.

A low guttural sound escaped Aster's lips before screaming as he faced Jack, "You bloody dill!"

"â€|what's a dillâ€|?"

Upon hearing an innocent voice questioned him. Aster immediately took a big gasp of air before slapping his mouth like a child caught by his mother cursing. He stared at Jack, who was smiling at someone from behind him, mirth still present in his brown eyes.

"What are you doing outside Emma?" Jack asked, walking towards his little sister.

"Waiting for you." She said, "Who's he?"

Aster, too flustered, was yet to face the child whilst Jack was enjoying every second of his new friend's embarrassment.

"Emma, I'd like you to meet E. Aster Bunnymund!" Jack exclaimed pointing at the still six-foot man with the use of his staff and whispered, "A.K.A The Easter Kangaroo."

With her face lighting up in astonishment, Emma whispered back, "Ohhâ€|"

Hearing Jack's signature nickname for him, Aster could not help but to growl in displeasure inwardly. "G'day little girlâ€|" He muttered, facing Jack and his sister who looked pretty much like that impish twerp. He just hoped that she was anything but that guy.

"I like his accentâ€|" Emma giggled at she gazed up to her brother's friend, for Aster was so tall that it made Emma looked like a doll.

Aster inwardly sighed. Praise the heavens for granting the Australian's wish, Emma was nothing but a cute cherub sent from the above!

"â€|It's funny."

Or probably not.

Jack laughed accompanied with his horse's neigh, irritating Aster's nerves to no end, _'Good grief! Day one hasn't even started yet and I'm already suffering! '_

"Come mister Bunnymund, our house is just a block away!" Emma said, giggling when she mentioned Aster's surname.

* * *

><p>The Overland residence wasn't fancy like what Aster deduced. After series of shacks they have passed, he begun to expect nothing more of a house from this lot. However, unlike in the town where apartments after apartments occupied the space, this area was spacious providing extra land for animals and crops.<p>

Jack's humble abode was, to put it simply, worn. It wasn't a shack nor was a shanty. To Aster, it seemed more like a simple house made out of logs put together, a cabin. But one could easily tell that it looked ancient for the fact that Aster could see cob webs hanging on every corner of the house, spoiled logs that were in need of a replacement and dusts covering every window Aster could lay his eyes on. And that was just the exterior.

Jack led Aster's horse at the back of his house where a small hut was adjoined. It was big enough to provide shelter for his horse.

"Well, that settles it. I bet she's tired." Jack cooed at the horse,

after releasing it from all its straps and load, "Are you girl?"

Clearing his throat, Aster groaned, "It's a girl, her name's Flora."

"â€|okay." Petting Flora's mane once more, Jack decided, "Let's just go inside."

Nodding in reply, Aster followed Jack inside his house. It was cozy. There was a small bricked fireplace at the corner where Emma and a brown-coloured Collie were playing. He saw a woman, preferably Jack's mother, with the same hair colour as this bloke he was with.

The smell of chicken soup reached Aster's nose, its aroma filling his empty stomach making him drool in the inside. Thankful of the deal he had with Jack, Aster greeted Jack's mother.

"Whadya' say? Home sweet home?"

'_Indeed.'_

* * *

><p>So...hi.

**Basically this is an AU where Stoick is not what he seems. Lol, haha! An AU inspired by the song 'Demons' by Imagine Dragons where all Vikings are drakes (I was given the information that drakes were liek half-human, half-dragon *shrugs*) and the Guardians are humans. **

**I hope I got Hiccup, Jack and Aster's personality. Please tell me if they're OOC and I'll try my best to correct it, I think... yeah... By the way, Jack's sister's name was not said in the movie but in some fanfics I've read, most of them are called her 'Emma' so I'm sticking with that one. Hehe~ **

**Okay so I don't really know a thing when it comes to Burgess and their currency, and firewood. Forgive me. **

Review please and let me know what you think. Thank you ^^

2. Difficult To Deal

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

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><p>And the cards all fold

* * *

><p>Winter was characterized by soft shower of snow at the apparent rising of the sun above the horizon, signifying how the beginning of the day should be celebrated with glee and content. As the warm colours of the day blend with the whiteness of the season, birds all over the area sang, their harmonious voices filled the town with sweet melody echoing when it reached inside the houses nearby. The

people woken by the tune, rubbed their heavy eyelids away from their slumber as they prepare for their daily morning activities.<p>

It was indeed a pleasant morning in Burgess.

However, different from most towns, the land of Burgess â€" during winter seasons â€" suffered a great deal of unfavourable occurrences by the time the sun decided to descent.

Burgess was plunged in shadows throughout the hours of darkness. The only lights could be seen were reserved inside the homes to serve them warmth because of the strong blizzard, freezing everything in sight. Yesterday evening was never different from the nights Burgess had to endure before.

Majority of the people hated winter. They loathed the cold for the reason that most of their business dwindle due to the lack of customers and supplies. The farmlands and crops wilted, languished even, that left the surrounding animals malnourished and ailing â€" in the end, they too will eventually die â€" all because of winter, the wrenched coldness and destruction it brought.

But Jack never hated the cold. He loved it. The chilling effects he felt whenever his bare feet touched the snowy grounds outside his home, made him brighten for the whole day that nothing could stop him from running around in merriment. It was as if Jack was born out of snow that low temperatures never bothered him that much.

Perhaps that was the reason as to why he was outside wearing nothing but a poncho over a shirt and a jaded pants. His usual shepherd's crook was clutched by his pale hands as he run around, his laughter reverberating throughout the entire quiet hamlet as he waved his staff rather furiously in feign performance.

"Jack! Quiet down, it's still early!" Emma whined as she followed her brother. Unlike Jack, Emma was very much affected by the cold no matter how much she enjoyed winter. As a result, she had to wear thick clothing mainly for protection much to her distaste.

"But Emma! This is so fun!" Jack exclaimed, dropping the fact how loud he was as he picked up a stray piece of flattened wood nearby, "Come on! I'll show this new one!" His large chocolate brown eyes gazed around carefully the surrounding area clearly looking for something.

Emma followed, growing quite tired as she forced her small legs to trudge through the heavy piles of snow. "This better be worth it!"

"'Course it will be! Trust me!" Jack said proudly, beaming when his eyes halted at the sight of a slope covered in snow. He nodded for his little sister to follow, a gesture used when his tongue got caught up in excitement as he went ahead to climb the slope.

Upon reaching the top of the slope, now with Emma heaving large huffs of breath, the two cautiously stared down from where they were standing. The slope was high, but enough to tower a shack and cast shadow extending for a considerable distance. It was one hundred percent made of snow, running smooth and inclined that caused Jack to grin unable to hold his eagerness any longer.

"Hold on tight Emma!" Jack said, his grip slackened letting the wood he picked earlier fell down beside as he perched atop it. A sigh could be heard as Emma wearily took a seat behind Jack, clutching her brother's shirt firmly. "On the count of three."

"One!" Emma whispered, her eyes narrowed as she peered anxiously below, afraid of the dangers they might encounter.

"Two. Three!" Jack yelled excitedly. With the use of his beloved staff, he pushed their board forward, propelling the two to slip and descent.

Sudden cries of surprise could be heard as the Overland siblings screamed, enjoying as the frosty air greeted their flushed faces. By means of gravity, the pair went downhill faster than what Jack had intended, their board running smoothly along the slope with no bumps to hinder the slide. Sadly, their fun hadn't last long as their speed decreased, slowing down when the ground was already level.

Their board gradually stopped, sending flecks of snow around, ending their ride as the pair laughed. Never did they notice a tall, ash blonde man, watching them.

"Oi! You overgrown ankle-biter and little girl, try not to demolish the shacks with your laughter." A voice laced with Australian accent called, making the duo glanced up from their seat. There, walking towards their direction with the brightness of the sun shining harshly behind his back was Aster bearing a tan frock coat for warmth.

The sun glared back at them, flinching, causing the siblings to stare at person towering them with narrowed eyes. "You two are loud, it made my ears bleed."

"Aster! Fancy seeing here outside!" Jack teased, quite amused at how his friend sounded due to his late night illness, "How's your cold?"

"Oi! Must you remind me?" Aster sighed, rolling his eyes, seemingly exasperated at Jack's inquiry which caused the latter's sister to giggle. "G'day little girl, your mom asked me to bring you inside."

"Aww!" Emma whined, showing her stubborn side as she decided to hide behind her brother's back. "But, I like it outside."

"Yeah, Aster. Give her a break." Jack nodded, getting up from his seat.

Aster shrugged in reply, choosing to watch the siblings dust themselves off from any stray snow. He seemed to be impatient as he groaned, "Look kids, as much as I enjoy your earbashing -" pointedly glaring at Jack who snickered in return, "- I have stuff to do. So little girl, if could please go inside and greet your momma..."

"Where are you going mister?" Emma asked quite curious about what Aster was to do as she ignored Aster's plea.

"Town Square." Aster curtly replied, his annoyance rising as he internally whined and thrashed around like a babe. Turning his back from them, he sighed as he walked away, "Some business I have to take care of."

"What business?" Jack piped in, his curiosity growing in child-like wonder. Yesterday, when they were gathered at the table for lunch, Mrs. Overland had a small talk with Aster. It was the usual boring chatter that made Jack incapable of listening any longer, hence chose to partake in entertaining his little sister to keep his head from dropping on the table, fast asleep.

However, his ears caught up at the word 'hospital'. Aster and his mom were talking faintly that Jack was rather surprise to have heard it. He was never the fan of that charitable institution for the sick, but that didn't mean he care less for any of them. In fact, he sympathize them for the lack of fun â€" not to mention the pain - they were suffering, for all Jack knew, the patients could be at the brink of death! And those were unhappy thoughts, just by pondering about it made Jack feel the sensation of remorse, his chest heavy with sorrow.

As a result, Jack just had to ask Aster what it was all about. He had the knowledge that his friend was a woodsman, but dealing with the sick never suited the latter.

Aster blandly replied, as if dealing with Jack was his everyday nuisance, "None of your business."

"Ha! Good one." Jack started, chuckling at the emotionless reply, "But come on! You have to tell or we'll come with you."

Abruptly stopping in his tracks, Aster faced the duo, his face showcasing an ill-concealed frustration, "I'm going to visit a very boring, very old, very strict plump friend who needs my help. Now run along, I don't need the two of you, kiddies, causing trouble for me."

Carrying on with his walking, Aster paid no attention to the tingling feeling he caught signifying how bothered he was by what those two were supposed to do. It wasn't even a day when Aster learned how mischievous those two could be, especially Jack. Although now, he had nothing to do but to gulp down the feeling â€" and his temper â€" seeing as how he would live with the Overlands till the end of winter. Oh, how he prayed to the heavens for winter to end already.

He shook his head in concentration. Aster would never allow his sentiment cloud his judgement, be it Jack's attitude or how the universe seemed to hate his every fibre of existence, he had a job to do. A job he had promised to dedicate himself into expiation. Never mind dealing with the trouble those could make, there were more dangerous problems his sorry bum had to face.

Aster was too caught up with his thoughts, walking forward with his head bent down gazing at the snow-filled pathways. Unfortunately for him, he didn't notice how the two snuck up on him, silently following.

* * *

><p>"What are you thinking?! Priscilla will rage when she sees the two of you gone!" Aster complained, yelling at the two Overland siblings in front of him. Aster was already at the Town Square when he took note of the chilly sensation when one was being followed. Much to his dismay, as soon as the Australian found out how the pair did not even bid their mother as to where they were headed, he began plotting apologies " or rather, excuses " to compensate their ever worried mother.<p>

"What will she think of me now? An unpleasant influence for the two of you, that is!" Aster continued with his ranting, "No, erase the fact that I included you. You're already a bad example for your sister. Look at her! Freezing and I bet she hasn't taken breakfast yet."

Jack was surprised, offended even. The retort he was supposed to hurl back went hanging, his tongue stuck, caught on the roof of his mouth as he tried to force his words out. Instead, he glared daggers at Aster. Jack would admit the fact that he was curious and couldn't help but to follow and drag Emma with him, but in his defence, he brought food. Not much of a bad example.

Taking a small glance at his sister, she was indeed shivering behind those thick winter apparel covering her flimsy stature. She looked exhausted from the walk they had. Her nose was red, resembling a ripe tomato, a sign of how the bitter cold was affecting her making Jack stare at nothing in particular in guilt. Self-blame already working its way within him as he brought his little sister on his arms, carrying her for additional warmth.

Aster must have perceived more than what Jack could as he grumbled, "Come on. Let's not waste any more time out in the cold."

The Town Square, as expected, was overwhelmed. Huge piles of snow covered the grounds and nothing could be seen but town dwellers, who were up early to brush their doorsteps for easy entrance. All Jack perceived were all grown-ups with their kids helping them clean, no fun, much to his surprise. Ever since the brunette could remember, Burgess was never left cold without the warm smiles and laughter the children brought every single day.

Aster was getting antsy from the dull ambience outside was vibrating as he hastily led the two to a workshop not far from where they were moments ago. Like Emma, Aster shivering beneath the coat he wore as well, but he concealed it well, heaving calming breaths, for Jack not to notice. He didn't need a kid with cold resistant skin to worry for his being, thank you very much.

Upon reaching their destination, Aster was relieved whilst Jack was interested. Hanging at the top of the door was a board with an intricate calligraphy designed in red with the colour of gold at its rim stating: _North's Workshop_.

Clearly, it was a toy factory, however, it was small compared to the towering apartments and buildings to receive the notice it deserved. The workshop was a two-story tavern with bricked walls to furnish its sides, windowpanes displaying dusty exhibit of dolls and toys from behind were large and unkempt with flakes of snow filling the window's corners. An antique wooden door stood by the middle where

the trio found themselves staring and waiting. Waiting for someone to get the door and let them in.

Aster had rang the doorbell twice already, however it seemed as though no one was getting the door sooner.

Jack shifted his sleeping sister's form into a more comfortable position. Just by looking at Emma, Jack could tell that her condition improved, better than before, with no more red staining the tip of her nose and cheeks.

He let his eyes wander around. Jack had been around the heart of the town couple of times, trading sheep or wool when they lack of money. It was supposed to be crowded, brimming with merchants and events the town had to offer. But it seemed like winter just made everyone's spirit go downhill.

A sudden noise forced Jack back to focus, his eyes landing at the door as the handle rattled. It was then, pulled opened showing a large man with thick whitened beard, "Good morning Aster! I see you brought a friend!" He greeted, his voice laced with a heavy Russian accent.

To say that Jack was surprised was an understatement, for he had expected the burly Russian chap to act rather rude "or somewhat uncivil" than jolly. He was flabbergasted at the thought of this man in front of them smiling jovially. Perhaps he shouldn't have judged his appearance that easily.

Jack gave the man an apprehensive smile, bothered by the notion he had. On the other hand, Aster rolled his eyes heavenward at the Russian's salutation and muttered a raucous reply, "If only you knew"

The man made no comment, choosing to ignore Aster as he pulled the door wide open, "Come in! Come in! I made cookies!" Generously letting them enter his humble toy workshop, "My name is Nicholas St. North, what is yours young man?"

Jack's eyes immediately roamed around the quarters and one word could only describe the inside of the workshop: dusty. Cobwebs could be seen on every corner of the room, ceiling, while dusts lingered atop each furniture and display toys. It gave the impression of 'in need of cleaning' as Jack replied, "Jackson Overland. This is my sister, Emma."

"I see." North nodded in understanding. Suddenly beaming as he jogged to the foot of the staircase and called, "Oh! I bet she'll love Phil! PHIL!"

Emma stirred awake at North's amused cry. It was then hastily responded through heavy sets of footsteps and a loud whining coming from the top of the stairs.

Aster's groan was his only reply as Jack was left staring, his jaw hanging open, at the prospect of a rather large elk now descending from the stairway. An ill-concealed irritated visage marred its face, carrying an aura of smugness around as it sauntered quite leisurely towards the group, bearing a tray of warm chocolate chip cookies on its mouth. It was visibly eyeing Jack in disdain as it

scoffed.

"Now, now, Phil. That's not how you treat guests." North chided, petting Phil's beige mane as the latter, once again, scoffed. Phil " similar to his owner " was huge. He was taller than North when one would include his bone extensions, his large creamy white antlers. Although, he resembled North in appearance, personality wise, Phil was Aster in elk. Jack would have laughed at the irony.

"Phil hates your whole existence, mate." Aster chuckled, mocking Jack in revenge at his whole 'kangaroo' nickname.

"Whatever." Jack drawled, he wasn't going to let some moody elk ruin his amusement. He brought Emma down seeing as she wanted to pet Phil who approached her in turn, offering his tray of cookies.

"Phil would take care of you two. If you want something, don't hesitate to ask him." North offered, he was then chuckling at the sight of Jack and his pet stunned, gazing at him as upset stained their faces. Much to their displeasure, Phil whined. Stomping on the floor, throwing a tantrum like a spoiled child he was. "It's only for a while, Aster and I have to talk."

"But, you expected me to stay with this reindeer-" Jack complained, ignoring how Phil sneered on how he mistook him as a reindeer. "- who obviously hates my guts?"

"It's just a phase, frostbite. He'd warm up to you soon." Aster said, quite pleased at the thought of his friend stuck, losing his patience over some temperamental animal.

"Phil is anything but warm, look at him!" Jack said as he pointed at Phil, who was wagging his tale, as he let Emma pet his mane. The tray of cookies left beside them as Emma giggled in amusement.

"Aww! they cute look cute together, don't you think North?" Aster snickered at Jack's failed attempt to remain anywhere but this room.

North nodded in reply, "Phil is harmless, Jackson. Like I said, it'll be for a while. We won't be taking long." Turning his back at them, North then went upstairs, his additional weight causing the boards of the staircase to creak.

"Now Jack, need I remind you not to _annihilate _North's toyshop?" Eyeing Jack in a stern gaze, Aster couldn't help but to warn his troublesome friend. He knew very well how much mischief Jack could cause when bored.

"Sure!" With that, Jack slumped, decided to take a seat on the nearby couch as Aster proceeded to follow North. His icy blue eyes trailed behind Aster's back, waiting for his friend to disappear in sight.

"Jack, try this one! It's good!" Emma offered, Phil's tray of cookies was clutched on her hands presenting the said pastries to her brother. "Phil made it."

Jack raised an eyebrow, unbelieving, "You sure it isn't bitter like

his attitude?" Ignoring an indignant snort coming from Phil, he picked one, eyeing it in suspicion. Tossing the cookie in his mouth, Jack munched savouring the soft, chocolaty taste of the baked food.

"I have to admit. Phil, you make the best sweet in the world." Jack said to which Phil gave a proud expression, a smug smile adorning his elk features. "Are there more upstairs?"

Phil nodded as an idea hit Jack making him mirror Phil's infamous smug amusement. Getting up from his seat, Jack proceeded ahead making his way to the staircase, "Well then, let's go upstairs!" Unfortunately, it seemed like Phil got the Jack's idea as he blocked the brunette's path to a higher floor. "I'm not going to do anything!"

Phil didn't respond, but the look in his eyes screamed, _'Uh huh, as ifâ€|'_ _continuing to use his massive frame to hinder Jack.

"Please?"

"â€|"

"Pretty please?" Jack started, watching his little sister sneak her way past Phil's gigantic form. Oh, how proud he was for her ingenious thinking. Too bad the aforementioned uptight elk didn't notice her.

-o-o-o-o-

Children.

Aster always had a certain thing for children, no matter how big or small, naughty or nice, he loved them dearly. Now, he might not be the one who looked like he enjoyed the younglings' company but just by seeing all of them laugh in innocence with their eyes filled with hopes and delight made him cherish that a small part of him wanted nothing but to see them full of life.

Yet, the universe seemed to think of the other way around. It was an agony for E. Aster Bunnymund to bear the sight of Burgess rotting away with the children feeling lonely, scared and _passing away._ Dying similar to the way how a large animal dies when bitten by some snake â€" paralyzing slow. It would took weeks for the disease to stop all muscle movement, a sign of impending death where all nerve connections started to show symptoms of failing.

Like every adult in town, Aster knew nothing as were the healers. They have no single clue on what was it and why was it, particularly, targeting children. Was it because of their still-growing immunity?

Perhaps.

Furthermore, it was the only reason why Aster found himself visiting an old friend â€" in his study room full of trinkets might he add â€" heavily eyeing the huge globe sitting in front of him.

"It was a stupid thing to keep this from the children, North." Aster

started as North found him a couch to sit on, shifting and looking for a comfortable position. "They're in danger."

"Absolutely. That's why we can't."

"What?" Taking away his eyes from the globe, Aster glared at his friend who sighed in contempt. He didn't quite understand underneath of what North said. "'Can't' you say? They're dying. Slowly and without a cure and their parents' are feigning an act to keep their young ignorant!"

"It's their only way."

"'Course not!" Aster glared, he couldn't believe that this jolly friend of his was actually serious for once. Did North really believe that it was fine to keep children out, where that blasted unknown disease was at present? "The cemetery's been crowded lately and they-"

"You're more concerned for welfare of the funeral ground's?"

"- what? No! You're a smart bloke! Cemetery swarmed by coffins of kids with varying ages is a perfect sign that this disease is not something one should take lightly. North? What if this malady is airborne? They need to keep them inside where it's safe."

North opted to nod, ignoring Aster's outburst. He said nothing for awhile, no mutter of excuse was heard as Aster drunk in the silence.

"See this in their point of view, my friend. They are all scared, they fear for their children to pass away now that the last of our finest healers confirmed that they can do nothing about it."

Aster huffed noticing how North ignored his inquiry as he stared at his friend's blue eyes in a challenging way. "Still, keeping them ignorant is going to make them die faster."

"Would you rather see them hiding under their blankets fearing about their imminent demise?"

"No. But I rather see them live a little bit longer."

North sighed heavily as if the weight of Aster's prodding took him too much toll. "When winter is cold Aster, what do one usually gets? Slate blood."

"What exactly are you implying North?" Aster asked, his eyebrows furrowed in deep thought showing creases along his forehead. He would admit that he was rather confused with how his friend ended up giving him a some sort of explanation about hypothermia but with North being cryptic; it was definitely not helping him at all.

"What I'm trying to imply, my friend, is that they have given up." North started, his eyes downcast, "When someone loses in a card game, all they have to do is fold down their cards. It's a way of telling them that they give up. The healers in our hospital found nothing to cure the disease infecting the children around, not even a medicine to alleviate their suffering or a poison to kill them painlessly."

Aster was silent, for he had nothing to say to interrupt. "Losing a child is a very painful thing. It can cause major changes within the society but a losing _dozens_ of children is worse. Why did they give up when they could have searched again and again for a way to treat it? It's their only way of response through this situation. They have lost passion, thus, their bloods running stale" |

"and they want nothing more than to see their children enjoying their in delight than seeing them wallow in fear." Aster concluded, his eyes misty due to the revelation. It was a sad thing indeed. Parents were known for their attitude of doing anything to keep their young safe, but seeing them easily give up was a dreadfully heartbreaking sight.

And E. Aster Bunnymund was not going to tolerate it. He was here in North's study room of junk for a reason and he was _not_ about to waste it. "So what do we have to do?"

North looked up at Aster, the miserable gleam on his eyes was long gone replaced by a hopeful one as he smiled, "Thought you'd never asked."

* * *

><p>Ello! :D So...hi again?

**So sorry for not updating for hmm how many months (?) oh yes haha 3 months~ I was busy with this whole college thing. This guy is not ready for college, and I want to go hooome! I miss my bed, I don't want this dorm bed! **

Amoechan, dear sis, miss me?

Anyways, it's 1:53 PH time and my list of assignments are ever growing -- so I, well yeah, need to sleep hehe...

Reviewers are awesome, thank you and may your dreams be blessed with unicorns and rainbows.

**P.S. Just finished the whole season 3 Sherlock Holmes. I don't know what to do now! **

End
file.